

Johannes BRAHMS

(1833 – 1897)

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, opus 56a

The seed for the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* was sown in November 1870 when Karl Ferdinand Pohl (1819 - 1887), librarian for Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, ran across some unpublished manuscripts in his research for a biography of Franz Josef Haydn. Pohl assumed that these works, a set of six Feldpartiten (open-air suites for wind instruments), were by Haydn, and, knowing of Brahms' interest in old music, he invited the composer to have a look at the scores. Brahms was especially interested in a movement of the Partita in B-flat Major that took as its theme a melody labeled "Choral St. Antoni." The idea for a set of variations based on this tune apparently sprang to his mind immediately and he copied the theme into his notes before he left Pohl's study. He did not begin actual composition of the work until more than two years later. Though Brahms did not know it, the theme he copied out of Pohl's manuscript was probably not by Haydn at all. Considerable musicological research has been done to unearth the true source of the tune, but there is still no definitive explanation of its origin.

Brahms spent the summer of 1873 in the village of Tutzing. He was 40 years old and his career was going well. Named conductor of the chorus and orchestra of the Vienna Gesellschaftskonzerte the previous fall, he had spent that first concert season training and leading those forces in a series of concerts. Now he came to this resort town to relax and compose. That summer, Brahms finally refined two string quartets to the point where he would allow them to be published, and he was still at work on his First Symphony. This most imposing of musical forms (with its inevitable comparison to Beethoven) had occupied him since he was in his twenties, but he was still plagued by self-doubt. In particular, he was worried about his ability to compose for orchestra, and during that summer at Tutzing Brahms planned to write a brief work for orchestra to give himself practice composing for orchestra.

The structure of the Haydn Variations is simplicity itself: the theme, eight variations, and a finale. The original theme falls first into two five-bar phrases, followed by a series of phrases of irregular length. The eight variations, which stretch the theme in a range of ingenious ways, are all relatively brief.